

Sustainable gardening: How to get a truly green thumb

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THE QUESTION

I want to grow veggies on my balcony but I'm concerned about using soil that's been stripped off of productive land elsewhere. Do I have any options for sustainable apartment gardening?

THE ANSWER

The modern urban agriculture movement has become popular – from backyard composting and community gardens, to today's indoor vermicomposting and rooftop gardens providing food for hundreds of households.

In the age of frozen dinners, megagrocers and imported produce that's easy to find, urban agriculture is a great way for the 80 per cent of Canadians who live in cities to connect with our food system. It helps filter out air pollution, reduces waste in landfills by diverting organics to compost, and offers an affordable food source for low-income city dwellers.

The quality topsoil for sale at the local garden centre has to come from somewhere – sometimes from construction sites, but often from farmland that has been sold and stripped of its (economically and ecologically) valuable top layer. The peat moss that's used to retain moisture in a conventional planter-box garden – often as an ingredient in the store-bought soil mix – is harvested by draining fragile wetlands that develop over thousands of years, host countless wildlife and plant

species, and mitigate climate change by sequestering three times as much carbon as above-ground ecosystems.

A great alternative to topsoil and peat moss is mixing finished compost with coir – a natural fibre from the husk of a coconut that’s widely available in gardening stores. Coir is a by-product (it would otherwise be discarded when processing coconuts for milk and oil) and therefore could be seen as more sustainable; but given the lack of palm trees in Canada, it does come with a carbon footprint.

Another option is to try garden sharing – a new movement that connects apartment dwellers itching to garden with busy homeowners whose untended backyards yearn to be gardened. Our friend Kamal Mattar is a surgeon in Niagara Falls, Ont., who lives in Toronto and used to have a rather sad-looking, weed-dominated backyard. Instead of calling in a SWAT team of landscapers, Dr. Mattar found the website SharingBackyards.com and met Laura Hamilton, who lived in an apartment building nearby. When we stopped by Dr. Mattar’s backyard a month after they connected, Ms. Hamilton was happily watering raspberries, staking tomato plants that would yield a winter’s worth of sauce, and pruning zucchini flowers – a bounty that Dr. Mattar was happy to leave to Ms. Hamilton in exchange for a much more aesthetically pleasing yard.

And finally, if you’re concerned about fertile soil on Canada’s dwindling farmlands, you can help keep it where it is by supporting your local farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture baskets – a weekly, local, farm-fresh produce delivery service.

USC Canada (Unitarian Service Committee) is a Canadian organization working on food security issues at home and overseas: It has a great [online guide for finding your local CSA](#).

Despite our climatic challenges, Canadians love gardening – in fact, gardening is so popular it rivals our love of hockey, with 11 per cent of

Canadians over the age 30 gardening and only 5 per cent of adult Canadians regularly playing hockey. Sadly, when it comes to watching, gardening isn't quite as riveting without body-checks, overtime and shootouts. But when it comes to doing, there are many creative ways to get outside and make our thumbs – and our gardening principles – green.

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